

**SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: NEGOTIATING HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP  
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*While there has been growing theoretical and policy interest in the areas of home-school partnership and inclusive education, relatively little work has linked the two fields. Where there have been studies, these have focused primarily on parent or school perspective. With inclusive education in its nascent stage in Singapore, this study examines the different roles emerging from home and school as well as factors underpinning this partnership. Data was drawn from interviews with 13 parents and 30 school staff. Our findings indicate that home-school partnership is a work in progress that is continually subject to home and school dynamics. The expectations and perceptions of parents and educators must be taken into consideration if the partnership is to succeed and sustain. Support from the wider community creates a synergy which reinforces home-school partnership and increases the visibility of children with disabilities by turning a private concern into a shared societal issue.*

In 2004, Lee Hsien Loong set out his vision for Singapore by declaring in his inaugural speech as prime minister to build a nation leaving none behind. Lee (2004) explicitly stated, *We will look after the less educated and the elderly who have helped build Singapore. And we must also have a place in our hearts and our lives for the disabled, who are our brothers and sisters too* (para. 17). Lee (2004) went on to articulate: *Ours must be an open and inclusive Singapore* (para. 26).

Without any legislation providing for special or inclusive education in Singapore (Wong, Poon, Kaur, & Ng, 2014), this explicit declaration to support persons with disabilities has been a watershed, leading to the introduction of two key initiatives to include and support students with mild disabilities in mainstream schools (Lim, Wong, & Tan, 2014). All primary schools and 52 secondary schools are resourced with at least one allied educator (AED[LBS]) trained to meet the learning and behavioural needs of students with disabilities through the provision of in-class support, individual or small group intervention (e.g. literacy skills, social skills, and study skills), transition support and case management (Ministry of Education, 2013). In addition, 10% to 20% of teachers in each primary and secondary school received in-service training in special needs. They provide individual or small group support within classrooms, monitor academic progress of students with disabilities, and share expertise and resources with other teachers and parents (Ministry of Education, 2013). Following the introduction of these support structures, there has been greater presence of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. Today, students with disabilities who are cognitively able to access mainstream curriculum are part of the general education system, and are supported mainly by the AED (LBS) and teachers trained in special needs. An estimated 2.5% of school going children (or about 13,000) aged between 7 and 18 years are reported with disabilities (Enabling Masterplan, 2012). Of these, about 7,600 are in mainstream schools and 5,400 in special schools.

Home-school partnership generally describes a collaborative relationship between parents and educators where the underlying goal is to maximize the full potential of students with and without disabilities in schools (Deslandes, 2001; Henley, Ramsey & Algozzine, 2006). In this relationship, parents are viewed as experts on their children while teachers are seen as experts on education (O'Connor, 2007; Olsen, & Fuller, 2012). The benefits of home-school partnership such as improved academic performance, reduced classroom misbehaviour, more positive attitudes toward learning, and better school attendance have been

widely discussed in the literature (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Levy, Kim, & Olive, 2006). While there has been growing theoretical and policy interest in the areas of home-school partnership and inclusive education, relatively little work has linked the two fields (Vincent, 2003; Norwich, Griffiths, & Burden, 2005). This is surprising given that the planning and provision of inclusive education hinges on the combined forces of parents and educators to understand the unique needs of children with disabilities and secure appropriate support within the mainstream setting to alleviate those needs. Where there have been studies connecting the fields, these have focused primarily on parental or school perspective which rarely paints a complete picture of home-school partnership. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) conducted surveys to examine the level of agreement between parents' and schools' perceptions of home-school partnership. Discrepancies were apparent in their reports on school practices to involve parents and parent participation in school activities (NCES, 2001). For example, 78 percent of schools shared that they involved parents in the decision-making process to a great or moderate extent, but only 64 percent of parents affirmed this practice. While 81 percent of parents indicated their attendance at parent-teacher conferences, only 57 percent of schools confirmed high parental attendance (NCES, 2001). Such discrepant reports suggest the need to study the views and voices of parents and educators to paint a complete picture of home-school partnership.

This study seeks to understand the current state of home-school partnership in inclusive education in Singapore and identify factors underpinning this collaborative relationship through the multiple voices of parents and educators. This is of particular significance as Singapore is at a turning point in its efforts to recognize and work towards supporting individuals with disabilities, having signed the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2012 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2012). The espousal of the UNCRPD will set the stage for greater visibility and representation of individuals with disabilities in school and the wider community.

#### *Home-School Partnership Models*

The changing paradigm of home-school partnership can be described as a shift in power and control among stakeholders. In the first quarter of last century, the partnership was marked by unilateral decision-making of educators whose professional competence to achieve desired learning outcomes for children was indubitable (Olsen, & Fuller, 2012). Parents were cast as clients who were potentially inadequate and dependent, and therefore had passive and marginal involvement in schools (Wolfendale, 1983; Fine, 1993). Since the 1970s, there has been growing recognition of parents as collaborative partners and equal allies in education (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell, & Frankham, 2003; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010; Olsen, & Fuller, 2012). Home-school partnership has since been characterized by joint decision-making between parents and educators who pool and share their knowledge and experiences to secure optimum education for children (Griffiths, Norwich & Burden, 2004). In recent years, this partnership has extended to the wider community. While educational provisions have conventionally been limited to the existing resources and capacities of home and school systems, emerging partnership draws on the wealth of expertise and resources within the community to ease the pressures and demands on parents and educators (Khong & Ng, 2005; Epstein, 2007).

Epstein (1992) adopts a holistic approach to home-school partnership by depicting home, school, and community as overlapping spheres of influence on children's learning and development. The model emphasizes the separate but complementary influence of home and school, and promotes alliance between the two spheres (Deslandes, 2001). Collaboration between home and school reaches the apex when parents and educators function as genuine partners in shared activities. The model also captures six classic types of parent involvement that encourage and strengthen home-school partnership (Epstein, 2007): (a) parenting (type 1), such as supervision of child's behaviour; (b) communication (type 2), such as teachers keeping parents informed about students' progress; (c) volunteering (type 3), such as parental assistance in school events; (d) learning at home (type 4), such as parental support in homework; (e) decision making (type 5), such as inclusion of parental voices in the development of mission statements; and (f) collaborating with the community (type 6), such as support networks for parents and afterschool recreation for students. Notably, the typology indicates a two-way partnership and makes a distinction between school-based and home-based involvement. School-based involvement includes activities like volunteering (type 3) and decision making (type 5) where parents support the school by assisting teachers in school programs and events or voicing their opinions and ideas in the evaluation and review of school policies and practices. Home-based involvement, on the other hand, encompasses activities like parenting (type 1) and learning at home (type 4) where the school supports parents by sharing information on child

development and parenting skills or providing ideas on creating a conducive and nurturing home environment for learning.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) expand on Epstein (1992, 2007)'s model by examining parents' decision to become involved in their children's education. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) propose that parental (a) role construction, (b) sense of efficacy, and (C) perception of opportunities, invitations, and demands for involvement predict parental participation in their children's education. More specifically, parents tend to become involved when they see personal involvement as part of their obligation as parents, when they believe they are competent at helping their children, and when they perceive their children's and the school's desire for them to be involved. Accordingly, parents are less inclined to become involved if they expect teachers to shoulder all the responsibility for their children's education (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud & Dornbusch, 1993), if they have low self-efficacy in supporting their children's learning and development (Deslandes, 2001), and if they perceive their adolescents' wish for more independence and less overt parental involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1993).

#### *Home-School Partnership in Singapore*

Until late 1990s, the primary focus for the education system in Singapore was to stay au courant with the latest developments in curriculum and pedagogy to maintain its leading edge in the global educational landscape, and thus the degree of parental involvement in education was marginal (Khong & Ng, 2005). The establishment of the advisory council COMMunity and PArents in Support of Schools (COMPASS) in 1998 turned the spotlight on the passive and peripheral involvement of parents in mainstream education (Teo, 2000; Khong & Ng, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2012). All mainstream schools were, and still are, encouraged to develop policies and programs to promote and strengthen home-school-community collaborations. Since the inception of the COMPASS, 96 percent of mainstream schools have set up parent support groups which serve as a social platform for parents to volunteer for school activities, develop closer relationships with teachers, and network with other parents (Masagos, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2012). The parent support groups also serve as a communication channel for parents to seek information, raise questions, and voice concerns on school policy and practice (Fu, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2012). Recently, the Parents in Education website was launched to engage parents in education and child development at home by providing information and resources on parenting, school curriculum, and home learning activities (Ministry of Education, 2012).

While these efforts to foster and strengthen home-school partnership serves parents of typically developing children, no such platforms are available for parents of children with disabilities in mainstream or special schools who require additional support (Enabling Masterplan, 2012). To date, there are few studies on home-school partnership in Singapore. Given the gaps in research literature, this study seeks to examine the different roles emerging from home and school to support inclusion and identify factors underpinning this partnership which can augment the educational experiences of students with disabilities in mainstream schools.

#### **Method**

##### *Sample*

Thirteen parents participated in this study. In four cases the child's mother and father were interviewed together. In other five cases the child's mother was interviewed alone. One child's parents declined to be interviewed. Of the 13 parents, three obtained a bachelor's degree; three held a post-secondary diploma; four received a certificate of secondary education; and three had below secondary education qualifications. The parent sample was made up of lower to upper middle income households, reflecting a good representation of the larger population. Children discussed in the interviews included seven boys and three girls aged 14 to 17 years with mild disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, visual impairment, and complex medical condition (e.g., lupus, rickets). Of the ten children, seven were Chinese, two were Malay, and one was Indian. All of them were students from two mainstream secondary schools which were purposefully sampled for our study.

Both secondary schools were nominated by professionals (i.e., teachers, psychologists, and psychiatrists) and other parents of children with disabilities as an exemplary school that has shown good support for students with disabilities. The first school is a government-funded, co-educational secondary school resourced by the Ministry of Education to support students with autism spectrum disorders. The second school is a government-aided missionary all-boys secondary school resourced by the Ministry of Education to support students with dyslexia. Thirty school staff (15 male and 15 female) involved in the education of the ten children with disabilities also participated in this study. The school sample was made

up of 20 subject teachers, four department heads, two allied educators, two counsellors, and two principals. Of the 30 school staff aged 26 to 55 years, 21 were Chinese, six were Malay, and three were Indian. Majority of the staff obtained a bachelor's degree; only one held a post-secondary diploma.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

A semi-structured interview guide was constructed to provide insight into home-school partnership in inclusive education. To ensure consistency and comparability of data, all participants were asked the following questions: (a) how is your child/student coping emotionally in school, (b) how is your child/student doing academically, (c) how is your child/student supported in school, and (d) to what extent do you collaborate with your child's teachers/student's parent to support him/her better? Additional questions were posed to elicit more in-depth responses. Unlike the lead questions, probe questions were not asked verbatim and were adapted to facilitate the flow of the interview and enhance participant reflection.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Nanyang Technological University and the Ministry of Education for this study. Participants were provided with written and verbal explanations of the nature and purpose of the study, and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of data to encourage candour and open sharing of information. Thirty-nine face-to-face interviews were conducted with parents and school staff, with each interview lasting 90 to 120 minutes. In addition, four staff focus groups were organized to fill information gaps and gather feedback on the authors' interpretations of participants' perceptions of home-school partnership. Each focus group discussion lasted 45 to 75 minutes. All interviews and discussions were conducted in English, audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

The authors analysed the transcripts independently for emergent themes relevant to home-school partnership using the constant comparative method introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Inductive coding was subjected to repeated refinement as more data were analyzed, and related codes were clustered into core themes. All discrepancies and redundancies were resolved through a discursive process. Themes were determined to be valid when they were endorsed by at least one-third of the participants (four or more of 13 parents and ten or more of 30 educators).

#### *Findings*

Six major themes emerged during the interviews: (a) endorsement of home-school partnership, (b) home-school communication on a needed basis, (c) constraints on home-school partnership, (d) supplementary provisions to home-school partnership, (e) challenges in home-school partnership, and (f) community support in home-school partnership.

#### *Endorsement of Home-School Partnership*

Both parents and educators see partnership as a desired and desirable outcome for the betterment of children's education. Educators recognize the critical role parents play in the learning and personal development of children within and beyond the classroom (Peters, 2002):

*I think parental support is very important in every child's life. If parents are involved in their child's life, the child will be more resilient. They will be more attentive in class. They will have a better attitude towards learning, towards teachers, [and] towards peers. (Teacher B)*

*With the partnership of parents, the school vision will be achieved because the parents are there to support the school. What we can do is within school. Beyond that, the parents got to come in. (Department Head A)*

Parents concur that the responsibility of children's education should not rest solely on the shoulders of the school. They construe parental role as including personal involvement in their children's education:

*We cannot expect the school to give him everything on a single platter... We believe that the key to success is how closely parents actually work with the school... I do not believe that education is dependent on the school. It has to involve the parents as well. (Calvin's Father)*

*Home-School Communication on a Needed Basis*

Both parents and educators report that the only time they contact each other is when students are in trouble despite acknowledging the importance of home-school partnership. This disconnection between rhetoric and practice is echoed by Epstein (2007). Aside from the biannual parent-teacher conferences, parents see no need to step into the boundaries of the school unless their children are struggling at school. Parents perceive the lack of contact from school as an indication that their children are coping well in school or educators are managing the needs of their children:

*I hardly contact unless problems come up... No contact is good. Smooth.  
(Quinn's Mother)*

*In secondary one and two, we didn't [meet the teacher]. There was no necessity because he was doing so well. The teacher didn't need to meet us. (Wayne's Father)*

Some parents feel that their children are not receptive to their overt involvement as they are going through adolescence and desire greater autonomy (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Parents may perceive that their children do not want them to interfere in school, as evidenced by common adolescent pleas for independence from parental control:

*She has this attitude now... I guess she is growing up. I mean as a teenager, you don't like people to be over your shoulder looking at what you do. (Elise's Father)*

*I normally do not like to intrude... when you talk to the teachers, the kids will be like 'Oh, what the teacher tell my mom?' I don't want to spoil that openness that he shares with his teachers in school. (Jason's Mother)*

Educators themselves see communication with parents as a last resort to remediate outstanding problems. They hardly meet individually with parents unless exigent circumstances occur (Khong, 2004):

*I keep in touch with most of the parents quite often unless the student does not have many problems. Then I meet them like once a term. (AED [LBS] D)*

*Parent contact is minimal because we usually call them when something bad happens. (Teacher E)*

This practice is likely to be determined by constraints on educators' time and energy. Educators are continuously confronted by various demands and responsibilities (Griffiths, Norwich & Burden, 2004). Given that they need to grapple with lesson planning, curriculum teaching, co-curricular activities, administrative duties, and multiple initiatives instigated by the Ministry of Education, constant communication with parents of all their students may appear to be a laborious task.

*Constraints on Home-School Partnership*

The literatures has drawn attention to a prominent difference between home and school in the education of children, that is, the care of a single child versus all pupils (Power & Clark, 2000; Griffiths, Norwich & Burden, 2004). This feature takes increased significance for children with disabilities who require additional learning and socio-emotional support. Educators are working at full stretch. At the same time, they are responsible for the academic achievement of all students under their tutelage. They cannot afford individual attention or lessons that children with disabilities genuinely need:

*Our responsibility is the whole student body. It is not just looking after one small selected group of students. But by looking after this small selected group of students, we want to benefit the rest. (Principal K)*

*Some parents fail to understand that teachers themselves have a very big commitment. They do have to take care of rest of the kids. (AED [LBS] C)*

Furthermore, schools do not have the expertise to adequately support the socio-emotional and behavioural development of children with disabilities. This is of particular importance during the adolescent period of storm and stress where they go through puberty and face increased academic demands and pressures:

*On our side we could not provide the regular therapy that they [students with disabilities] need. Our teachers are not trained to be therapists... So we have to tell the parents that we are sorry but their child needs help in areas that we are unable to provide. (Principal K)*

*Lance is like an active volcano and we won't know when it will erupt... We are trying to look for professionals outside who can work with him on a one-to-one basis. The school does not have the calibre to support, so the experts really need to come in and help address his issues. (AED [LBS] C)*

Although parents demonstrate empathy and understanding towards the schools, it does not mean that they lower their expectations of school support. They expect existing support to continue even though it may be minimal:

*The school provides remedial lessons for all students, not especially for Sarah... cannot because not only she has difficulties. I mean other students also have problems. The teacher cannot spend time on her only. (Sarah's Mother)*

*We have home tuition because he cannot see a lot of things in class and we don't expect every teacher to give him one-to-one lesson. (Calvin's Mother)*

Parents themselves lack confidence in their ability to support their children in schoolwork. Parents with little formal education believe that they do not possess the necessary knowledge and skills to help their children with homework (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). The greater specialization of subject areas and corresponding complexity of schoolwork at the secondary level further diminishes parental sense of efficacy (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Parental sense of competence is also tempered by the unique learning difficulties associated with their children's disability:

*Last time, I could help with primary school homework, but at secondary school, I can't help. (Quinn's Mother)*

*I can speak English, but when it comes to writing I really can't help. I rely on DAS [Dyslexia Association of Singapore], school and tutor. (Samuel's Mother)*

#### *Supplementary Provisions to Home-School Partnership*

Parents thus actively seek private tuition and professional therapy to supplement the inadequacies of school and home support and give their children with disabilities the best chance for mainstream school success:

*Samuel goes to DAS [Dyslexia Association of Singapore] every Tuesday for two hours. Now the DAS teacher mainly teaches him composition writing because he is struggling... I rely on the DAS teacher to see how they can help. (Samuel's Mother)*

*We do have one educational psychologist. Whenever I have issues with Elise, I will get her advice. So we fall back on her to help us with certain issues that we cannot handle. (Elise's Mother)*

The tripartite partnership brings together home, school, and external agencies in an effort to alleviate the needs and difficulties of children with disabilities. Parents gather feedback on their children's academic performance and classroom behaviour from the school, and work on the areas of concern with private tutors and psychologists, as evidenced in Ivan's case:

*The subject teachers will feedback on the areas he is not doing very well and I would feedback to his mother who will work things out at home together with the tutors. (AED [LBS] D)*

*The psychologist is working very closely with Mrs Karen [AED (LBS)] to tackle those issues that Ivan have in school. I hope that he can learn coping skills. (Ivan's Mother)*

The supplementary support of private tutors and psychologists, however, comes at an exorbitant price:

*We thank God that at this point in time we can afford to support Calvin financially, but up to what level? There is a limit to what we can really support him. How about other parents who are financially not able to support? It is even worse. (Calvin's Father)*

By extension, parents who can afford supplementary provisions for their children with disabilities, which in turn relieves the demands and pressures on school. Parents who do not have excess income at their disposal, on the other hand, are confined to more passive roles and rely upon school to provide extra support:

*To hire a tutor is quite expensive. If we can, we will. It depends on our finances. (Sarah's Mother)*

*I hope his subject teachers have extra time to coach him. I want to put him through Math tuition. It is a bit expensive so he does not want to go. Now my hope is that the school can give extra lessons to students with special needs, maybe after school extra remedial or something like that. (Samuel's Mother)*

#### *Challenges in Home-School Partnership*

While educators affirm the importance of home-school partnership, they find it a challenge to secure parental involvement. Congruent findings were reported by Markow and Scheer (2005) in their survey of mainstream secondary school teachers:

*At this moment, partnership with parents is our weak link. It is a challenge. Last year, we organized a parenting workshop... It was very sad because on paper I had 50 parents who signed up, but on the night itself we only had three. (Department Head A)*

To maintain a middle-class standard of living today, most families consist of dual working parents (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). Even though parents see personal involvement as part of their parental role and want to be more actively involved, this desire is complicated by layers of responsibilities which prevent them from being responsive to educator's overtures for greater involvement:

*So far, no [have not volunteered in school]. Although we were approached, we have no time. (Elise's Father)*

*Other than communicating to them that there is going to be such an activity, we don't really get parents involve that much. Due to their work commitments and stuff like that, it makes it very difficult for them but they are very supportive of their child to attend. (AED [LBS] C)*

In addition, educators described parental denial as a particular bugbear in home-school partnership. Parents of children with disabilities can be defensive about their children's condition. Some parents are resistant to educators' referral for evaluation given the stigma associated with disability:

*Some parents do not want diagnosis. We cannot do anything if the child is not diagnosed. The parents are saying that their child is normal, so who are we to question that? If the parents say no or feel uncomfortable, that is where it ends. (Department Head A)*

*We spoke to a mother who does not seem to be willing to get her child a diagnosis for autism. Is there some form of support? Somewhere we can refer to or get external help, even if the parents refuse to? (Principal G)*

Another cluster of parents have difficulties coming to terms with their children's disability. They believe that their children will outgrow their disability with the course of time, and refuse to seek or accept help:

*Parents are always hoping for a miracle although some of them are very educated. They read a lot and they know that this disorder is not going to go away. It is how you manage as the child grows up. Many parents are still in denial because it has been a tiring journey for them and the journey goes on. (Counsellor F)*

Although educators understand that raising a child with disability is a daunting prospect to parents, they are concerned that parental disbelief may deprive their children of early and appropriate intervention (Olsen, & Fuller, 2012).

#### *Community Support in Home-School Partnership*

Educators are unequivocal in their belief that children with disabilities who can cognitively access general curriculum should be given the opportunity to attend mainstream schools, but they are inundated with numerous initiatives and varied demands. They question their capacity to provide quality support to an increasing number of students with disabilities:

*I am not against the idea that more spaces should be opened up for students with special needs. They should be given the opportunity but... there must be some benchmark. For example, every year the intake should not be more than 30 students with special needs. There is a cap and the rest go to other schools. Support is only workable when there is quality in it. If not, it is as good as not doing it. (AED [LBS] C)*

*I feel that the support is not quite there for students with special needs. I must admit. It is there because my teachers have the heart. But if you are talking about real professional help, I must admit, as a leader, it is not quite there because my teachers are really, really stretched. (Principal G)*

Educators emphasize that inclusive education should not be the sole responsibility of individual schools. They perceive a need for more resources and support from the Ministry of Education to fully address the educational needs of children with disabilities:

*Each of them [educational psychologists from the Ministry] serves like sixteen schools. And primary schools only. They support secondary schools on a consultancy basis, so they won't even go down to our school. I think that is the extent of support we have for now. (Teacher H)*

*We would love to have a psychologist be attached to every school. In Australia, therapy work is part of the mainstream school. Therapy does not belong in our world, that's the issue. (Principal K)*

They also contend that effective inclusion requires an orchestrated network of synergistic support within and across education, health, and social services at the societal level as it is clear that the expertise and resources of a community exceed those of a single family or school (Khong & Ng, 2005; Epstein, 2007; Olsen & Fuller, 2012):

*We feel that there is a need for greater collaboration, not only from school but the society... from grassroots leaders, from the Ministry of Social and Family Development, from religious organizations. I think it must be a multifaceted approach... They play a part because we can only do so much here and the damage can be done outside. (Department Head M)*

#### **Discussion**

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), parents' decision to become involved in their children's education is influenced by their construction of parental role, sense of efficacy, and perceptions of opportunities, invitations, and demands for involvement from children and schools. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) further pointed out that role construction is a necessary but insufficient condition for involvement. To translate the role construction into action, parents must have a sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school. In this study, parents recognize the crucial role they play in the learning and development of children with disabilities within and beyond the classroom, but feel they do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to handle the complexity of schoolwork at the secondary level as well as the unique learning difficulties associated with their child's disability (Eccles & Harold, 1996). This does not automatically translate to a low sense of self-efficacy as parents actively seek alternative sources of support to help their children succeed in school.

In Singapore, private tuition has become commonplace due to the prominence placed on academic excellence (Cheo & Quah, 2005). Most parents hire experienced tutors to get individualized attention and



lessons that their children with disabilities genuinely need. Furthermore, they engage licensed practitioners such as psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists to address the socio-emotional needs of children. Private tuition and professional therapy serve to supplement areas not adequately provided for in mainstream school and augment home-based involvement activities like parenting (type 1) and learning at home (type 4).

School-based parental involvement, on the other hand, is negligible. Most parents are not involved in volunteer activities (type 3) or decision-making processes (type 5). They fit the image of a *good parent* who does not intervene and support school efforts from a distance as painted by Lortie (2002) in his study of teachers. This is consistent with the literature that parental involvement is still largely seen as unnecessary interference in school governance and policy matters in Singapore (Khong & Ng, 2005). Even communication between home and school is sporadic; it occurs as and when it is necessary. Given that successful students have parents who stay informed and involved in their children's education (Epstein, 2007), it is good practice for schools to update parents on a continual basis for both positive and negative events throughout the school year (Montgomery, 2005). Regular two-way communication enables parents and educators to promptly nip problems in the bud before issues become severe (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). As few parents are likely to become involved without encouragement from the school, schools need to take a proactive role in spurring parental involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 2007; Olsen & Fuller, 2012). Parents are more inclined to be involved when they think the schools are receptive to their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In fact, Anderson and Minke (2007) reported that specific invitations from teachers were a stronger predictor of parental involvement than parental sense of efficacy and level of family resources.

Parents have layers of responsibility. They have the onerous task of juggling career with parenthood. For parents of adolescents with disabilities, the task is further compounded by age-specific and disability-specific issues (Singer & Powers, 1993). Apart from everyday stressors, parents need to manage the academic and socio-emotional needs of their children with disabilities. While private tuition and professional therapy are covetable provisions of support, they are extortionately expensive. It is also an exhausting and endless pursuit for parents to find the best services and newest information regarding their child's disability (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). The demands of time, energy, and emotion prevent parents of children with disabilities from being responsive to schools' overtures for contact. Schools need to understand the stresses and vulnerabilities of parents of children with disabilities to design strategies for more effective parental involvement.

Together with upward trends in dual working parents, nuclear families, and income inequality (National Family Council, 2011; Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2012), parents are increasingly confronted with financial and emotional squeezes such as rise in the cost of living, absence of extended families for support, and double responsibilities of the sandwich generation (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). This implies that more homes, particularly working class parents, will struggle to fulfil their parental responsibilities (Khong & Ng, 2005). Neither will they be able to afford costly private tuition and professional therapy to support the educational needs of their children with disabilities. Schools will need to step in and augment home support in the learning and personal development of children. On the other hand, with rising trends in parental education and involvement, schools are subject to greater scrutiny and accountability than ever before (Khong & Ng, 2005). Educators must manage the different and higher expectations of middle class parents who are well-educated and want the best for their children. Given these two countervailing trends in parenting, schools need to learn how to engage diverse populations of parents in a constructive partnership.

Nonetheless, schools cannot be expected to shoulder all the responsibility of inclusive education. Neither educators nor parents can face the challenge of supporting children with disabilities alone (Khong, 2005). Parents and educators must see each other as collaborative partners and equal allies in their common journey to realize the full potential of children with disabilities (Teo, 2000). The wider community can reinforce home-school partnership by providing wraparound services and creating richer educational experiences tailored to the needs of children with disabilities (Epstein, 1992). This includes collaborating with service agencies, faith-based organizations or businesses to seek professional help, support networks or structured work placements for students with disabilities. Moreover, an orchestrated network of synergistic support within and across education, health, and social services at the societal level increases the visibility of children with disabilities and turns a private concern into a shared issue (Griffiths, Norwich & Burden, 2004).

## Conclusion

While both home and school embrace the concept of partnership, it is an arduous task that requires a commitment of time, energy, and resources (Mortier, Hunt, Desimpel & Hove, 2009). The expectations, perceptions, and opinions of parents and educators involved in the education of children with disabilities must be taken into consideration if the partnership is to succeed and sustain (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). Home-school partnership is a work in progress that is continually subject to home and school dynamics. The success and sustainability of partnership necessitates an understanding of the difficulties homes and schools face. The phrase *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak* is an apt description of the current state of home-school partnership in a meritocratic Singapore society. Cooperation and support from the larger society is imperative to bridge the gap between rhetoric and practice (Epstein, 2007).

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